The rise of nationalism in Putin's Russia

Alexander Verkhovsky[1]

The problem of political nationalism, especially radical nationalism, from the very first moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union, became one of the most discussed questions concerning Russia. A great deal was written on this topic; nevertheless, the interest in the topic is still alive. On the other hand, political life in Russia in the middle of this decade is so very different from the 1990s, that the place and role of nationalism could not remain the same. That is why it is impossible to limit oneself to what has been previously written.

First of all, it is important to explain that the question concerns Russian ethnic nationalism and not any other form of nationalism. Of course there are different forms of ethnic nationalism in Russia, but their peak occurred at the start of the 1990s and ended a long time ago. They have totally exhausted their mobilizing potential, since regional separatism has long ceased to be any kind of real goal, and the mechanisms of autonomy have been learned and 'privatized' by regional elites, most of which are moderately ethnocratic. The topic of cultural renaissance reached the 'defending' phase and is now more linked to the notion of 'human rights of ethnic minorities' rather than with the notion of 'ethno-nationalism'. In some of the regions of North Caucasus the protest potential of ethno-nationalism was utilized by radical political Islam (it was most visible in Chechnya, but similar processes are also occurring in some other North Caucasus republics). But it was Russian ethno-nationalism that grew significantly at the beginning of Putin's rule, and I will consider this form of nationalism here.

It is also important to define briefly those changes in the ideology of Russian nationalism between the periods of 'perestroika' and the second presidential term of Vladimir Putin. In particular we are interested to what extent Russian nationalism can be considered as a form of ethnic nationalism. This question has always been problematic for Russian nationalists themselves and for their critics. It is no coincidence that in the 1990s instead of the term 'Russian nationalists' the term 'national patriots' was used which allowed one to emphasize the complicity of the attitude of Russian nationalism to the topics of ethnicity and of imperialistic patriotism. The basic nationalistic slogan 'Russia for Russians!', i.e. the idea of the empire ruled by Russians, was very controversial regarding what 'Russians' mean, where the empire's borders are located and which social and political order is preferable for the empire.

Russian nationalism, when it was emerging from its semi-underground

---

[1] Alexander Verkhovsky is Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis (http://sova-center.ru).

and underground state during the latter soviet decades[2], was inclined to affirm the values of the Russian empire, especially its nationalistic traditions. Moreover, the differentiation between the legacy of the Soviet empire (ideally the late Stalin empire) and the pre-revolution empire (there was and still is the division between the imperial, post-Peter the Great ideal, and the more patriarchic ideal of the XVI-XVIIth centuries) was weak. The subsequent differentiation, even if it still has not finished (in the least differential form Russian nationalism is still preserved in the Communist Party (CPRF) of Gennadiy Ziuganov), nevertheless made it possible to separate the development of various ideological tendencies.

By the end of the 1990-ties all the country realized that capitalism had become a long-term reality, and, if not accepted, it should at least be tolerated. Accordingly, 'left-wing nationalism' in the form of Soviet 'restorationism' almost disappeared. Now nationalists can either support various variants of a free economy, or exploit the populist ideas in the spirit of paternalistic state regulation. Anyway, economic problems never play a very important role for most of the nationalists. We can suppose that populist paternalism is so spread out probably not because of the preferences of the nationalistic leaders, but because of its great mobilizing potential compared to the liberal economic ideas.

In the second half of the 1990s the illusions of even the partial resurrection of the USSR disappeared (the topic of an Union with Belarus is still marginal). As a result the nostalgic Soviet component of Russian nationalism has weakened significantly and continues to weaken. But the beyond-ethnic imperial component in the nationalistic movement also weakened together with the hopes for the rebirth of the Soviet Union. Therefore, only ethnical identity remains the basis for the construction of the Russian nation. The dreams about the mighty Russia have not of course disappeared, but the attention is now wholly concentrated on inner-Russian problems (the majority of nationalists and of citizens as a whole have finally agreed with the appeal of Alexander Solzhenitsyn to reject outward expansion — exactly because there is no strength to do so).

The process of construing the nation through withstanding the external enemy leads to the same result. Starting with the famous incident when Evgenij Primakov turned back over the Atlantic ocean in 1999 and declared the West (and first of all the USA) to be the main enemy of Russia soon became the semi-official and constantly stressed ideology of Russian authorities. This is even more so the further anti-Westernism becomes the core of president Putin's politics, who tries to turn Russia into an empire that would compete with the US (it happens more on the propaganda level rather than in reality, but this is the level we are now interested in). Of course, Russian nationalists support such

---

2 On this see the book: N. Mitrokhin, Russian Party: Movement of Russian nationalists in USSR. Years 1953-1985 Moscow, 2003.

politics, but they cannot limit themselves to only supporting the President. In such a situation nationalists as a social movement concentrate on the 'inner enemy', whom they can only define in ethnical terms and mobilization against such an enemy can only be ethnical.

So, public Russian nationalism during Putin's rule has become precisely ethnic nationalism[3].

We can consider the ideological evolution of Russian nationalism from another point of view as well. A considerable proportion of Soviet citizens were shocked as a result of the disintegration of the USSR and of the following collapse of the Soviet economy. These emotions experienced by many citizens were converted into opposition feelings that were construed as a total rejection of reforms as a whole. Accordingly, there was wide support for the opposition and it spoke actively against capitalism, the demolition of the Soviet empire, liberal economic politics and liberal understanding of political democracy (the government's course which was opposed by the opposition was not really consistent, but the opposition was oriented not by reality but by the proclaimed slogans). This opposition was then called 'red-brown', since communist, imperial and ethno-nationalistic ideas coexisted within it (but not peacefully). The nationalism of that time relied on the mass shock and on the ethnic xenophobia legalised within the framework of total freedom.[4] Of course, the nationalistic organizations were just the visible top of the mass iceberg.

In actual fact, the ideas of the nationalists were barely applicable to the mobilization of even that part of the population whose superstitions contributed thereto. The unveiled copying of Nazi (and partially Italo-facist) symbols and ideas repelled too many. The biggest ultra-nationalistic organization of the 1990s was created with such copying of ideology — the Russian National Unity head by Alexander Barkashov; it gradually absorbed the major part of the nationalistic movement, but membership of RNU never exceeded 15,000.[5] The pre-revolution 'Black Hundreds' tradition was even less popular since the elaboration of the 'Sacred Russia', full of archaic and clerical terminology, was not understandable to many.[6] The experiments in mixing communist and nationalist ideas were successful, but it was a limited success that gradually

---

3 A view, more compassionate to ethno-nationalism, that does not prevent the same outcomes being achieved, see: V. Solovej, T. Solovej, 'Apology of Russian nationalism', in *Political class*, 2006, No. 23.

4 An interesting section of the xenophobia structure in Russian in the mid-1990s can be found in the compilation: *Intolerance in Russia: old and new phobias*, Moscow, 1999.

5 RNU is best described in a two-volume book: V. Likhachev, V. Pribylsovksi, *Russian National Unity, 1990-2000*. Stuttgart, 2005. The limited nature of RNU, as well as of other ultra-nationalistic movements, is accurately demonstrated in: Umland Andreas, ''Uncivil society' in Russia', *Price of Hatred. Nationalism in Russia and the struggle against racially motivated crimes*, Moscow, 2005, pp. 142-165.

6 See on the Church variant of the nationalism of the 1990s: A. Verkhovsky, *Political Orthodoxy: Russian orthodox nationalists and fundamentalists, years 1995-2001*, Moscow, 2003.

decreased. Finally, various extravagant ideas of a nationalistic kind were not very applicable or not applicable at all; the most famous example would be Alexander Dougin[7], who created the ideology of the National-Bolshevik Party, but then left NBP, and the party itself almost completely rejected the ideas of radical ethno-nationalism.[8]

By the end of the 1990s the shock reaction at the beginning of the decade had been exhausted, the Soviet nostalgia weakened, and the new Russian statehood stopped being problematic. Accordingly, the majority of the motives for the mass sympathy for nationalistic ideas became much less significant. Nevertheless, from 1999 onwards new motives appeared — the rise of mass anti-Westernism and an almost total understanding of the 'war on terror' in ethnic terms in connection with the beginning of the 2nd Chechen war. 9/11 consolidated the mass Islamophobia that appeared during the new Chechen campaign — another motive for the new Russian nationalism. Finally, at the beginning of the decade anti-immigrant spirits were consolidating.

For example, in 2002 58% of the population expressed their negative feelings regarding newcomers from 'southern republics' (and the same percentage of those surveyed supported the prohibition on people from the Caucasus living in their area) as opposed to 10% who expressed positive feelings; 59% of those surveyed supported formal privileges for ethnic Russians; all such percentages increased compared to the mid and late 1990s and were practically stable in 2002-2005. The slogan 'Russia for Russians' was supported by a quarter of population in the mid-1990s, in 1998-99 — by 43-45%, in 2004-05 — by 54-55%.[9]

Ethno-xenophobia thus took on new forms and at the same time became much more widespread. We have to underline that young Russians who were in school in 1990s were taught in a much more ethnocentric way than pupils in late Soviet times. For them (but not only for them) nationalistic ideas and interpretations did not seem unusual by the end of the 1990s. We may add that ethno-xenophobia is not only a manifestation of social destabilization, but in Putin's years it becomes the only possible channel for such a manifestation, because other usual channels are blocked: not only is a 'class struggle' discredited (and Russian capitalism is very young) and religious confrontation is limited in a very secular post-Soviet society, but now any political opposition is accepted by the vast majority as impossible.

Precisely the idea of 'migrantophobia' could most optimally accumulate

---

7 Dougin's role is correctly described in: M. Laruelle, 'A. Dougin, Ideological medium', in *Price of Hatred*, pp. 226-253.

8 The essence of the NBP evolution is of special interest, since such an evolution of a party from one of the forms of neo-fascism to the left-radical platform is unseen in history. See: M. Sokolov, 'National-Bolshevik Party: ideological evolution and political style', in *Russian nationalism: ideology and spirit*, Moscow, 2006, pp. 139-164.

9 L. Goudkov, 'Russia for Russians': xenophobia and anti-migrant feelings in Russia', in *Does Russian society need immigrants?,* Moscow, 2006, pp. 31-78.

mass- phobia. One should understand that the term 'migrant' in Russia is not at all equivalent to the term 'immigrant'. Under 'migrant', judging from its context, is understood any person who is 'not native' to a certain region (part of the country, district), and who has moved (in fact or just supposedly) to this region. The constant mixing of these two terms, 'migrants' and 'immigrants', in the mass media (and in the discourse of nationalistic activists) allows the most rigid patterns of foreign (including Western) experiences of immigration control to be transferred the control of the 'ethnically alien'. It is not even disputed in Russia that 'migrants' are a problem (precisely 'migrants' themselves, not only the 'migration process'). Then this problem is interpreted according to the ethnocentric ideas[10] commonly acknowledged in Russia. As a result 'migrantophobia' has huge support in various levels of society, including among state officials, law-enforcement bodies and the mass media.

The discourse of 'migrantophobia' is not only a useful substitute for racist discourse, because 'migrantophobia' blurs the difference between the 'unwanted foreigners' and the no less 'unwanted' fellow citizens. It has clear ties with the above-mentioned Islamophobia (but religious hostility is rather weak because religious understanding of any problems is very weak in Russian society[11]), 'anti-terror' and also with Chechenophobia (Chechens and Roma are the two most hated ethnic minorities in Russia). It is also a natural ally of ethno-xenophobia and social xenophobia directed against the 'new comers', which is well known from Soviet times. This mix became so successful because of several factors. Support for the ethno-xenophobic ideas in Russian society stabilized at a level of over 50% since 1999 and many people who are xenophobes now see themselves as the majority; it is much easier to be part of the majority. Compared to the mid-1990s the cultural distance between local inhabitants and new immigrants has grown significantly: nowadays there are almost no ethnic Russians among the immigrants or even people who move from North Caucasus to other parts of Russia, there are less and less such people who can speak Russian well and who have been taught in an unified Russian school. So it is now much easier to say that immigrants (and 'migrants' demagogically speaking) are 'aliens'.

Finally, thanks to the analogies with the West-European attitude to immigrants (or at least to the image of this attitude in the Russian mass media) 'migrantophobia' looks like a modern and an adequate way of treating the problem — compared with admittedly archaic versions of Russian nationalist rhetoric that was dominated in the 1990s. Moreover, if during the previous decade the word 'nationalism' itself and everything connected to it was unequivocally evaluated by the mass media as being negative, now it is no

---

10 V. Shnirelman, 'Incompatibility of cultures: from the scientific concepts and school education to real politics', in *Russian nationalism: ideology and spirit*, pp. 183-222.

11 This becomes clear when monitoring hate speech in the mass media. See the last report: G. Kozhevnikova, 'The Hate Speech after Kondopoga', in *Hate Speech against Society*, Moscow, 2007, pp. 10-71.

longer so, thanks to the 'politically correct' language of 'migrantophobia' that was learned and is used by a number of nationalistic leaders, by many journalists and cultural activists who are fond of ethno-xenophobia.

Accordingly, the circle of nationalistic ideas has also shifted substantially in the new decade. Ethno-xenophobia in the form of 'migrantophobia' became the dominating idea and the main means of propaganda. Such nationalists are much 'closer to the people', e.g. they are more suited to the ethno-xenophobic majority than the nationalists of the 1990s. More or less the leaders of nationalism in Putin's years are the activists known from the 1990s, but there were huge changes in organizational structures and in the list of the first heads of Russian nationalism.

And most importantly: in the 1990s nationalists were in obvious opposition, the minority, and they felt themselves to be so accordingly. The formation of a stable ethno-xenophobic majority in the new decade was quickly realized by the political class and by the mass media. Accordingly, nationalists, whose organizations are not large-scale, feel themselves to be the representatives of a real majority in the country. More or less only President Putin himself with his incredibly stable confidence, can feel himself to be the representative of the majority. No other political or public institution has the large support of the public (apart from the Church, but its rate of confidence cannot be converted into any real influence).[12]

If we turn to the spectrum of nationalistic organizations that are noticeable on the federal level (of course there are significant differences between the regions in a country such as Russia), we can note the following tendency: most known nationalists from the 1990s remain in the public eye, but they are losing their position as a moving force in the nationalistic sector of politics, and their place is being taken by the new organizations that better correspond to the above- mentioned ideological changes.

The liberal-democratic party of Vladimir Zhirinovski has livened up as a nationalistic party since 2002 — it was very visible in the many regional elections, and in the federal elections as well. Locally, LDPR is very closely connected with the other nationalistic groups, and these are often the same people; there are real ultra-nationalists in the party. On the other hand, the most famous LDPR ultra-nationalist, the State Duma deputy Nikolai Kurjanovich, who directly protected the skinheads, was excluded from the party and from the Duma fraction on October 31st 2006. Most likely, his excessive self-dependence began to disturb Zhirinovski.

Vladimir Zhirinovski still tries to preserve LDPR as a politico-commercial enterprise, in fact, it has been known for a long time as LDPR Ltd[13] that imitates nationalism and opposition, cooperates with businesses of all kinds and

12 B. Dubin, 'Fardeau leger', in *Revue d'Etudes Comparatives Est-Ouest*, 2005, Decembre, Vol. 36, No. 4.

13 V. Pribylovski, 'Attitude of national-patriots to Putin after March 26th, in *National-patriots, Church and Putin*, Moscow, 2000, p. 84.

supports the Kremlin on all important points. The existence of LDPR in the Duma is an important obstacle to the nationalistic movement.

The Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which was the main driving force of moderate Russian nationalism in the second half of the 1990s, now distances itself from this topic. Of course the nationalistic ideas are still very popular among the leaders of the party and among its electorate (however, in the electorate of the ruling 'United Russia' the feelings are the same, and the electorate of the other parties are not far behind in the xenophobia race, less than one would suppose)[14], but communists, subject to rare exceptions, use only social motives in their agitation policies. We can see some changes reverting back to nationalistic rhetoric after the Kondopoga riots, when nationalism seriously intruded with political life (even the ruling 'United Russia' party started their own 'Russian project').

The shattered Russian National Unity maintains reserve, characteristic of the RNU, and does not actively participate in social life. RNU is almost unnoticeable in Moscow (and Alexander Barkashov, the leader of the Moscow chapter of RNU and the former single leader, has been charged with a criminal offence after a scuffle with a police officer and could receive a prison sentence).

Among the other parties Sergey Baburin's 'People's Will' is worth mentioning; it is still represented in the Duma (as the remains of the once united fraction 'Motherland' (*'Rodina'*)) but has no chance of getting into the next Duma. Baburin cooperates with all kinds of nationalists, from Orthodox monarchists (from the Union of Russian People) to the national-Stalinists of General Albert Makashov, but all these forces, that drew so much attention in the 1990s have left people's minds, even though they continue their activities pickets, meetings, conferences, publishing newspapers etc.) on the same scale as before. All of them still cannot suggest anything that would be attractive to society, and at the same time they are not sufficiently original to create their own active community, e.g. like that of the skinheads.

Only the 'Orthodox community' could be considered an exception, but the mere existence of this community is only possible because of its isolation. The 'Orthodox community' is not a political community; it is centred on the Church and works more with Church structures than with the secular ones. This community embodies the full spirit of Russian nationalism (in its different versions), but it is united not by nationalistic aims, but by anti-secular ones, and this is especially so in the moderate groups. In 2005 the radicals made a serious attempt to consolidate Orthodox monarchists of a more or less 'black hundreds' spirit (in the precise sense of the term) — in November of that year the Union of Russian People was organized once again. But since then the Union has become entrenched in inner conflicts and is almost invisible to society as a whole. Generally, it is a major question whether the Orthodox

14 In detail see L. Goudkov, Ibid., pp. 67-70, 77-78.

activists can really influence society. However, the Orthodox movement became an almost inevitable part of nationalistic ideology, and the nationalistic movement therefore needs Orthodox activists, but they will not necessarily be invited to perform leading roles.[15]

The relatively high popularity of Neo-Eurasianism in the 1990s has initiated a great deal of various political phenomena including the specific nationalism of the National Bolshevik Party. As mentioned above, A. Dougin's ideas do not suit the mobilization of the masses, so the political role of Neo-Eurasianism created by them (and continued by other political authors) was no longer that visible at the beginning of Putin's rule. But Dougin managed to create a new phenomenon — radical nationalism that would be absolutely loyal to the authorities (until recently such views were prevalent among in the opposition, often among the radical opposition). In spring 2005 Dougin created the Eurasian Youth Union. This organization took part in some violent actions. In August 2006 nationalistic-minded people who had left the National Bolshevik Party created the National Bolshevik Front that was closely cooperating with the Eurasian Youth Union. These organizations could play a noticeable role, however, for now, they just indicate the mere possibility of loyal ultra-nationalism.

Nazi Skinheads are the most popular and dynamic part of the Russian nationalist movement. This movement is neo-Nazi in its essence, but allows for cooperation with nationalists of all kinds and even those who have no clue about the various forms of nationalism and have no desire to know about this. But the skinhead movement is more a sub-culture rather than a political movement[16] and principally is not inclined towards consolidation. Another important argument is conspiracy: the less vertical and open structures there are, the better for the conspiracy. It is worth mentioning that there are huge discrepancies between the estimated number of activists — from 20,000 to 70,000; I am inclined to think that the more or less stable organizationally active part — that can be mobilized not only for criminal, but also for political action, for example for participation in meetings — is closer to the first figure. For example, around 3,000 people participated in the 'Russian march' on November 4th 2005 in Moscow; at least 2,000 of them definitely belonged to the skinheads.

The basis of the skinhead movement is systematic, ideologically-motivated violence. Violence is also the main manifestation of their views and the mechanism for recruiting new members. Here is the main difference of this movement with the nationalists of the 1990s, who were completely focused on propaganda. Of course, there were cases of racially-motivated violence then as well, but they were an exception to the rule (for example, in RNU the violence

---

15 I have written about this in more detail in: A. Verkhovsky, 'Orthodox nationalists: strategies of activity in Church and in politics', in *Price of Hatred*, pp. 175-195.

16 V. Likhachev. *Nazism in Russia*. Moscow, 2002, pp. 112-115.

was put off until the coming 'X-hour', and those who used violence could be expelled from the party, and definitely were expelled if the authorities got to know about the incident). According to our research,[17] in 2004 some 49 people were killed and more than 200 were seriously injured, in 2005 47 were killed and more than 400 injured, in 2006 — 55 were killed (including 13 people who died in the Cherkizovski Market explosion in Moscow) and about 500 were injured (of course these statistics are not at all complete, the numbers of the injured can be multiplied by at least two, maybe by four). Judging from our experience it is safe to suppose that the numbers during the last year will increase: many incidents come to light after a big delay. So we cannot speak about even any 'stabilization of violence'.

The impression formed by the mass media, that the majority of racial violence victims are foreigners, is not at all correct. We should also not trust skinheads who claim that their 'war' is first and foremost against people from the Caucasus. The objects of violence are being chosen quite randomly, the only criterion is their visual difference from the stereotype Slavic image (but even a 'visually Slavic' person can become a victim in certain circumstances). Nobody asks the victim about his/her ethnicity and of course nobody asks about citizenship. Of course, the risk for persons with a dark skin colour is much higher, because this is a principal tradition for Nazi skinheads. Other main 'groups at risk' — people from the Caucasus, immigrants from Middle Asia and other Asian countries etc. — are quite evenly represented in the violence statistics. We should especially note one growing victim category — representatives of 'racially alien' subcultures (e.g. rappers) and anti-fascists; and in the last couple of years quite noticeable have been the series of conflicts and fights between Nazi skinheads and 'militant antifa'. (By the way, the latter are increasingly becoming the instigators of the violence, and even though the scale of fights is not too great, the whole situation raises concerns and disagreements in human rights and anti-fascist circles).

Skinheads have monopolized violence to a great extent, but not totally. In the South of Russia many incidents are connected to Cossack formations. Some other nationalistic groups have also made isolated attempts at violence. And it is not the case that some pedestrians in the street are being attacked. Some attacks can be labelled as terrorist attacks. From the mined anti-Semite poster

---

17 The news and report of the SOVA Center on the topic of hate crime and hate speech are published at http://xeno.sova-center.ru (main news and reports are translated into English). See also: G. Kozhevnikova, 'Radical nationalism and the struggle against it in 2004-first half of 2005', in *Price of Hatred*, pp. 11-74. Same author: 'Radical nationalism and the struggle against it in 2005 and first half of 2006', in *Russian nationalism: ideology and spirit*, pp. 8-93. Only part of the report was translated into English. See e.g.: G. Kozhevnikova, 'Radical nationalism and efforts to oppose it in Russia in 2005', in *SOVA Center web-site*, 2006, 25 February (http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4208/6E811ED); G. Kozhevnikova. 'Radical nationalism in Russia and efforts to oppose it in 2006', in *SOVA Center web-site*, 2007, 22 May (http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4208/93A572E).

in 2002 ultra-nationalists moved in 2005-2006 to blowing up the Grozny-Moscow train and the explosion in the populous market in Moscow (and there are serious grounds to suppose that the attempt to kill Anatoly Chubais was indeed committed by the group of head by the national-stalinist colonel Vladimir Kvachkov).

It is also quite worrisome that local or arriving ultra-nationalists try to turn particularly local conflicts into ethnically-oriented public disorder. The most 'successful' (but, alas, not the only one) such case were the riots in a small northern town of Kondopoga at the end of August, beginning of September, 2006. A drunken fight in a restaurant prompted the restaurant owner to call a local gang (consisting mostly of Chechens) for help; two locals were murdered in the following fight witnessed by the police who did not intervene — all this became a reason for the public protests by part of the town's population. And these protests have successfully been redirected from the town authorities and the police to the Chechens living in the city. There were no subsequent killings but the mass media reported on the success of the nationalists and the stampede of Chechens from the town. The word 'Kondopoga' became a common noun, and the topic of the opposition of the 'aboriginal population' to the 'migrants' became one of the most discussed topics – in society, in the mass media and within the authorities.

The topic of opposition to 'migrants' as the basis for the nationalistic agenda has been used since the beginning of 2002 by the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (MAII), headed by the activist from National-patriotic Front 'Memory' (*'Pamyat'*) (the oldest post-Soviet nationalistic organization) Alexander Belov (in 'Memory' he was acting under his real surname Potkin). By the way, MAII was created during an Armenian pogrom in one of the small towns near Moscow. Since then MAII has grown significantly in numbers and especially in popularity and recognition. After the 'Russian marches' of 2005 and 2006, after Kondopoga where Belov spoke at the meetings in the town (and Kondopoga was not the only town he visited), MAII became the symbol of modern Russian nationalism.

The leaders of MAII try to avoid using open racist language. Thanks to this they themselves, their ideas and activities become popular in the mass media, where the 'anti-migrant' language of hostility has developed simultaneously. MAII has from the very beginning declared itself as a force not in opposition to the authorities; that opened possibilities for cooperation with a very wide range of people, who shared their ideas, and prevented pressure from the side of the authorities, which are very suspicious about any kind of independent activity. This means that membership in MAII is more symbolic. MAII is an open network of different groups, rather than a unified organization.

Such an organizational structure, multiplied by the recognition gained, makes MAII very appealing for many nationalists. Of course, many groups have a negative attitude towards MAII, but the lack of an official ideological doctrine and soft organizational principles makes it possible to minimize the inner

conflicts — the well-known problem of Russian nationalists. But the massive basis of MAII is formed precisely by the Nazi skinheads groups (but of course not all of them), which makes this movement not that harmless at all.

We can compare it to the 'Motherland' party. This party and the pre-election block of the same name that was created in a hurry with the Kremlin's participation before the parliamentary elections of 2003, was also using similar 'anti-migrant' rhetoric very actively, especially during the Moscow city election in autumn 2005. But 'Motherland', led by Dmitry Rogozin, was precisely a political force, it had claims on the constantly growing part of the electorate, it tried to become a real opposition: in the elections of 2003 the new-born block received 9% of the votes, in the Moscow elections two years later 15% were expected. That is why the party was debarred from almost all regional elections, Rogozin was expelled from his own party under pressure from the Kremlin, and nowadays the greater part of 'Motherland' has joined the 'Just Russia' party tightly controlled by the Kremlin.

In autumn 2006 Rogozin entered into an alliance with MAII that gave MAII the tinge of ambiguity inherent to 'Motherland' — as a project non-evidently coordinated from the Kremlin and at the same time demonstrating the growing opposition to the Kremlin. In early May 2007 Belov, Rogozin and his closest companion-in-arms, the ultra-nationalist and Duma member Andrei Saveliev, established a new political party, 'Great Russia', headed by Saveliev. Probably these maneuvers somehow reflect the inner-Kremlin conflicts.

So, we see that the notion of 'Russian nationalism' covers quite a complicated system of partnership relationships and other kinds that include a large number of groups of different sizes and status, from anonymous Kremlin officials to gangs of Nazi skinheads. All of them have different ideas about nationalism and about the notion of a 'nation' (this term in Russian means both a nation and an ethnos), but all of them in one form or another appeal or try to appeal to the stable ethno-xenophobic majority of the population that has already formed.

Can we somehow make a prognosis as to how this complicated system, that is conventionally called 'Russian nationalism', may develop? How can we answer the frequently asked question 'is there a threat that nationalism (variant: fascism) will triumph in Russia'?

If we summarize the rise of massive xenophobia and hate speech in the mass media, the rise of racist violence, the emergence of nationalistic organizations (especially in the last few years) and — maybe more importantly — traces of nationalistic discourse in almost all political parties, increasingly visible after Kondopoga riots, we may establish that there is increasing political Russian nationalism, compared to not only the mid-1990s, but also to the early Putin years. This rise is the aftermath of trends which partly appeared in the 1990s, but some of them are an integral part of Putin's regime, starting from the Second Chechen war, but including also imperialistic and anti-Western rhetoric (and strengthening the role of the Church in 2000-2002). All of Putin's

ideological trends have not been ethno-nationalistic as such, there are more reasons to construe them as re-sovetization, but in the ideological sphere it was Russian nationalism that could profit from ideological manoeuvres in the Putin period.

Can this rise in nationalism be converted into a political victory? The political regime that has emerged in the years of Putin's rule is not inclined towards any drastic changes. The only drastic change available to it is a total collapse, evoked by the growing ineffectiveness of 'Vertical Power'. And in the situation of a collapse, of course, different scenarios with the participation of radical groups are possible, but can barely be forecast. If we do not consider this variant, we will see that the regime enters into non-open competition with Russian ethno-nationalists (however, many see this competition as open).

The anti-Georgian campaign in autumn 2006 became the turning point. The conflict between Georgia and Russia itself could occur earlier or later. And this inter-state conflict is tinged by ethnical emotions to a lesser extent only. But the conflict immediately turned into a discrimination campaign (at times, a very brutal campaign) against ethnic Georgians in Russia, including Russian citizens (and not only recent immigrants from Georgia, but also fully assimilated people whose families have not lived in Georgia for a long time, but in Moscow, for example). This particularly racist aspect of the campaign was not explicitly sanctioned by the authorities, but it was not explicitly condemned by them either (not even mentioning that these activities were not prevented). Racially discriminating campaigns had occurred in Russia before, but this was only possible towards Chechens on the Federal level, it was 'justified' by anti-terrorist considerations; the anti-Georgian campaign, on the other hand did not have any justification at all, except speculation as to the 'anti-migrant' sentiments.

After that President Putin made two statements to the effect that the interests of the 'aboriginal population' in the sphere of trade in the markets should be protected[18]. The President did not use any ethnic terms, but in practice his words have led not only to quotas for trading places for foreigners on the markets (and therefore, to a rise in prices), but also to ethnic cleansing[19]. Moreover, the mere fact that the President did not use the term 'citizens', but a term from the lexicon of ethno-nationalists' 'anti-migrant' propaganda, was understood as a signal for the legitimization of such propaganda. And this signal is much stronger than frequent statements by the President about the necessity to fight xenophobia and the crimes motivated by it.

Of course the rhetoric and the practice of the authorities do not coincide

---

18 For the review of the feedback to the first such statement by Putin, on October 5th 2006, see: 'Political games with ethnic implications', in *SOVA Center web-site*, 2006, 7th October (http://xeno.sova-center.ru/29481C8/80E63BD).

19 See e.g.: 'The laurels of MAII disturb 'The Locals', in *SOVA Center web-site*, 2006, 27th November (http://xeno.sova-center.ru/45A29F2/852B692).

and will never coincide with the rhetoric and practice of the radicals: merely because of inevitable differences between the authorities and the radicals (and practical policies towards immigrants are not always exclusive, sometimes we see some inclusive measures; immigrants (as opposed to 'migrants') may be ethnically Russian, and there are strong economic arguments for encouraging immigration). But the events of last autumn and winter give us reason to believe that 'migrantophobia' and, more broadly, Russian ethno-nationalism are becoming a field where the authorities want to compete for popularity among the majority of citizens. This is also predetermined by the relative weakness of other socio-political oppositions: 'liberals — populists', 'government — opposition', not even mentioning the almost forgotten 'president — parliament' or even 'center — regions'.

Of course, the current Russian authorities have enough resources and strength not to allow their ultra-nationalist opponents (as all other opponents) not only into the government but even to relatively fair play. But the mere shift of public focus and state attention, that can now be observed, inevitably leads to the rise of discrimination practices and to the consolidation of the already formed ethno-xenophobic majority.

It is difficult to forecast how far this process can go, and it is even more difficult to say in what way this will exactly be reflected in 'big politics', first of all in the federal election in the years 2007 and 2008 (especially if Putin really leaves office). But one can suppose that, in addition to inter-clan conflicts in the ruling structures, precisely the disagreements between various nationalistic movements will become the substantial content of the political process in the near future. As the ethno-xenophobic attitudes in society are increasing and will continue to increase as we do not see any group in the ruling circles that strongly rejects the ethno-nationalistic rhetoric and way of thinking (excluding the less and less influential 'economic liberal' wing in the government) we are afraid that the competition in the narrow ruling circle will move it increasingly closer to open ethno-nationalistic policies.

Copyright of Helsinki Monitor is the property of Martinus Nijhoff and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.